滝壺理后（たきつぼ・りこう）
from「とある魔術の禁書目録」
学園都市に存在する暗部組織「アイテム」の構成員の大能力者（レベル４）。『能力追跡（AIMストーカー）』

絹旗最愛（きぬはた・さいあい）
from「とある魔術の禁書目録」
学園都市に存在する暗部組織「アイテム」の構成員の大能力者（レベル４）。『窒素装甲（オフェンスアーマー）』

クウェンサー
from「ヘヴィーオブジェクト」
第三七機動整備大隊所属の戦地派遣留学生。

ヘイヴィア
from「ヘヴィーオブジェクト」
第三七機動整備大隊所属のレーダー分析官。

ぶーぶー
from「最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女ベアトリーチェの弱点」
異世界グランズニールに住む、最強の【イベリコオーク】。

ベアトリーチェ
from「最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女ベアトリーチェの弱点」
炎を自在に操る【剣聖女】。最強すぎる能力故にぼっちになって色々とこじらせた少女。

フィリニオン
from「最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女ベアトリーチェの弱点」
【白魔女】のメガネ巨乳。他人の回復や図鑑のコレクタブルで【経験値】を稼ぐタイプ。

アルメリナ
from「最強をこじらせたレベルカンスト剣聖女ベアトリーチェの弱点」
地図マニアの貧乳【殴僧侶】。超重量の鎖々鉄球を呼び出す鉄の杖を操るが、中身は意外に乙女なところも。

Continue →

An All-In “World” Tour of Academy City, the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, and Ground’s Nir!!

Part 1

(???/37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion)

A strange atmosphere hung over that day from the very beginning.

“Hey, Heivia. Why are we sorting through the contents of this gloomy storeroom? Today’s the joint military exercise, right? That’s like an athletic festival. It’s a big event!”

“There aren’t going to be any glasses class reps in those bloomers of an older age, so just give up, student. We have that busty commander to blame for this. She doesn’t want the problem children in front of the reporters.”

It should have been a warning sign that Quenser Barbotage and Heivia Winchell were diligently sorting through the storeroom’s contents. You know, like when bugs and rats behave strangely before a major disaster.

“Well, our opponent in the exercise is the rumored 16th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, so this feels more like a way to use up excess ammo than a PR stunt.”

“The 16th? The ones that are always busy with charity work???”

“Yep, they’re the ones growing angel wings as they build schools and hospitals instead of firing guns. I’m pretty sure I heard about them helping excavate some historical ruins recently. Compared to them, anyone’s gonna look like the bad guys. We’re the ones doing all the dirty work they want to avoid, but they have no problem kicking our asses here. I can’t stand it and I don’t even want to see their faces. I’m afraid I’d accidentally shoot them.”

It was during that discussion that they discovered something odd.

“Hey, Quenser. I’ve found something.”

“Let me see… What are these? Some kind of party costumes?”

They had found a few items wrapped in a thick cloth with a unique dusty or musty smell.

“Are they for a Halloween or Christmas party?”

“Knowing that busty commander, she may have been secretly handing out candy to the local kids. Using these to hide her identity.” Heivia lightly kicked one of the costumes that looked something like worn-out full-body tights or a stuffed animal. “Figuring out who’s been using the people’s taxes to buy these things will be easy. We just have to put them on and wander around. Whoever goes pale first is the culprit.”

“Why bother? We can just ignore them.”

“I thought you were bored. Digging through this musty storeroom isn’t going to turn up a nude cheerleader poster.”

“…”

“…”

The two of them looked down toward the costumes. Almost like they were examining something.

This was likely the moment in which their fates were decided.

“Th-then I’ll take this gray pig one!”

Quenser grabbed the pig-faced giant. As for Heivia…

“This handsome guy called Kakine Teitoku looks like fun!!”

“Wait, what is that!? It’s all soft and it looks an awful lot like the result of a human shedding their skin…mgh, mgh. Bgh!? Why is my voice getting all muffled…?”

“Don’t ask me. That’s the name on the label here. More importantly, Qu-Quenser? It looks like that zipper on the back is swallowing you like a carnivorous plant! Are you sure you’re okay…?”

“And you look like you’re being eaten by human skin, so you should really get to the medical-…ahh!? I can’t feel it anymore! It was like

being thrown into a giant sea anemone before, but it's surprisingly smooth!"

Part 2

(Quenser/Academy City)

"Ah!?"

With an odd noise, Quenser woke up while still enveloped by the thick cloth(?). He found himself in a strange city full of gray skyscrapers and three-bladed wind turbines.

For a while, he simply blinked while sprawled out on the ground.

To Quenser, the city looked like something from the near future, but the artificial female voices he heard and the writing on the signs were all unfamiliar to him. There was kanji, hiragana, and katakana. It was all mixed together and he could not hope to read it, but there was some of the alphabet added on like some kind of bonus and that allowed him to just barely grasp the nuance.

(An Asian language? What? What in the world happened? This is a lot like the library footage of the Island Nation.)

He got to his feet and found he was on a giant pedestrian scramble.

This was not a studio set with backdrops built for an urban warfare exercise.

And he felt the eyes of all the people surrounding him from a distance. Most of them were middle and high school students. That bizarre uniformness sent a chill down his spine, like he had rolled a die ten times and gotten a one every time. For one thing, the Island Nation belonged to the Capitalist Corporations. Even if these were civilians, he was in trouble if he was unarmed and surrounded. In fact, he might meet a worse fate than a bullet between the eyes.

"Wah, wah, wah, wah."

Quenser waved his hands as if to cover his face and head, but…

“Boo boo, tap tap. I’m gonna eat every last one of you. Drool.”

His voice was distorted in an odd way. No, the very reverberation was strange. It was like the vibration traveled from his stomach to the top of his head instead of from his lungs to his throat. That turned it into a mass of sound he had difficulty making out.

He could only compare it to a human throat controlling a lion or penguin.

And that reminded him that he was wearing a giant gray pig costume. It fit so well he could forget he was wearing it and something was missing when he reached for his back. What was missing? The zipper!!

“Wait!? Wh-wh-wh-what? Hold on, what is going on!? This is scary! Is the zipper buried in there somewhere!?”

“Who should I eat first? Maybe a soft-looking kid. Boo, but I’m a good boy, so I can’t be picky. I’ll eat every last one of you!”

He then realized the people around him were acting oddly.

They would never guess this was someone wearing a pig costume and the vibration of its voice filled his entire body, so he could feel it in his organs. And all of the eyes on him contained undeniable hostility.

He had thought the distortions to his voice were robbing it of all meaning, but thinking back, it did sound something like an Asian language. Just like the wind could sound like someone sobbing when it echoed through a cave, it was possible the strange wavelengths were colliding in just the right way to sound something like their language.

Whatever the case, he did not want to make this any worse than it already was. He immediately shut his mouth and covered the giant costume’s mouth with the costume hands. The face felt damp and warm, but he was doubly surprised by the fact that the costume hands could sense that.

It was less like he was wearing it.

And more like he had become it?

(Oh, no. What is going on? I don’t like the way things are headed

this time!)

When his voice echoed through the pig costume, it just so happened to create wavelengths similar to their language. Much like the brazen bull that was said to make the victim's screams sound like the cries of a bull when they were stuffed inside and burned. To prevent further confusion, Quenser desperately suppressed his voice. He kept his question in his mind.

But he should have realized something.

At times, an ominous silence could induce negative emotions more than any words.

"Hello, do you have a moment? This is Judgment."

He was stopped by a girl's voice that sounded quite young but had definite displeasure mixed in. He could not understand her, but there was no denying the intense hostility in her gaze.

(If this really is the Capitalist Corporations' Island Nation, then she might be demanding to know who I am. And if they find out I'm from the Legitimacy Kingdom…will I be shot?)

Various sticky thoughts rolled around in the back of his mind, but there was only one answer:

"Run awayyyy!!"

"Boo. Frilly black lace doesn't suit you in the slightest."

A shout of "What!?" struck him in the back as he made a mad dash in the other direction. He was fast. Unbelievably fast. His strength was well past what it normally was.

"What the hell is going on!? This has clearly become my body. It's like my fat and muscles have been expanded!!"

"Boo, boo, boo. You should wear bear panties instead. Because you're still a child."

(Oh, damn. And my voice is taking that weird route from the bottom of my stomach to the top of my head! I wish they would at least tell me what they think I am!)

He did not just run on the asphalt. The Island Nation people seemed to have difficulty recognizing danger because they did not try to

move out of the way even as a nearly-4m form approached. They all stood still and aimed cellphones and smartphones at him. He kicked off building walls, wind turbine poles, signs, and roadside trees to break free of gravity's bonds and pass over the human wall like a bouncing pinball.

"Don't think you can escape my teleportation that easily! Oh, you're doing a better job of it than I thought. Argh, it's so hard to move around when you escape into such a densely-packed area!!"

The voice approaching from behind would distort unnaturally at times. Quenser was shocked when he looked back as he ran. The twintails girl kept disappearing. Like a film with a lot of frames missing, he would suddenly lose sight of her as she ran and then she would reappear in a spot she could not possibly have reached. And he was not just imagining it since it happened frequently.

Two possibilities came to mind:

- Something was wrong with his sensory organs.
- This twintails girl was the real deal. She could leap through space.

Both options scared him. But his body was moving on its own. Even while looking back and running faster than a train, he did not run into anyone. He would sometimes race down the road, sometimes lightly hop along the roofs of the cars, and sometimes cross a crosswalk while the light was red.

"Oh, honestly! Where did that thing go!?"

He could not understand her words, but her irritation was all too obvious. Even if she could ignore spatial limitations when she moved, she apparently used her normal five senses to designate a target. When Quenser ran below an overpass, jumped straight up, and clung to the underside, the twintails girl ran right on past without noticing him.

But Quenser himself was more surprised than anyone.

(Are you serious? Did I do that myself?)

Quenser shuddered at the fact that he could do this…and that he could accurately picture the next foothold in his mind.

This went beyond his body. It was beginning to mess with his thoughts as well.

He wiped unpleasant sweat from his brow while clinging to the underside of the overpass with his other three limbs. Only after doing so did he realize that sweat was on the giant gray pig's face, not his own. He found it hard to believe the damp pig nose was fake.

And just as he was thinking it was about time to drop down, he heard a sound much like a curtain flapping in the wind if the window was left open on a stormy night. When he turned toward the noise, he found himself eye to mechanical eye with a machine. It had black armor panels, a main rotor that sliced through the air, and what looked like six brutal tank guns hanging from the wings on either side of the skinny craft.

"An attack helicopter!? But what's with that insane layout!?"

"Squeal. That metal looks hard and yucky. I prefer meat."

It reminded him a concept car at a motor show that was never designed to make a profit. And it did not end there. A 10-wheeled armored vehicle equipped with an autocannon ignored the flow of traffic and stopped below the overpass.

Quenser had some questions.

But the introduction of "military" equipment actually cleared his mind. He began to prioritize actions above questions.

He was not hindered by these new arms and legs.

He was not using tons of levers and pedals to control a crane and it did not even feel like he was "controlling" anything. These really were his own arms and legs. That was certainly disturbing, but he could deal with that after escaping his current predicament.

"…"

Still holding on with both legs and a hand, the gray pig kicked off the underside of the overpass. He dropped down like a meteor. He first targeted the armored vehicle. The roof was its weak point and that was exposed to him. He twisted around in midair to land with all of his weight on his feet. The entire vehicle sank down. And not because it had excellent suspension. The roof clearly bent in and the

autocannon was crushed like an empty can.

And the attack helicopter's weak point was the very bottom of the belly. Helicopters might be reinforced with some bulletproof plating, but not many would equip weaponry on that area needed for takeoff and landing.

Quenser essentially peeled himself up off the flattened armored vehicle and jumped again. He used his powerful muscles to launch himself straight up. He was like a pinball. The autocannon must have triggered some kind of explosion because the armored vehicle blew up as the pig-faced giant dangled from the bottom of the helicopter.

But he was not holding onto the landing gear. His thick right arm had broken straight through its belly.

That threw off its balance.

Quenser swung his legs back and forth to build up momentum and then the entire attack helicopter spun around with him. He had control and he was calm enough to think about dropping it in a safe location. After building up centrifugal force with two vertical rotations, the gray pig released the attack helicopter from his right hand. The steel wreckage fell in a little-used coin-operated parking lot and exploded.

Quenser thought to himself as he stood at the top of a wind turbine and viewed the black smoke.

(Was it unmanned? It didn't show any signs of panic at the end and I don't smell any burning flesh.)

He hoped that was true, but even if there had been a pilot, they would have been military. A noncombatant would be one thing, but he had no reason to show mercy to an Island Nation soldier.

Meanwhile, he heard a normal everyday police siren.

(Crap, I need to get out of here!)

Weirdly, that shifted his mind from military mode and back into normal society mode. He jumped down from the turbine and began running away once more.

Part 3

(Heivia/Ground's Nir)

After putting on the skin of a handsome boy, Heivia found himself in the middle of nature.

(What is this place?)

He could smell salt in the wind. Was he near the beach or on an island? But the forest around him felt *too* natural. Even the most untouched areas would have traces of tire tracks or exhaust smell, crane-fly-like drones flying through the sky, and endangered animals with IC chips in their bellies.

(This isn't a desert on Mars. Can a forest really be *this* devoid of a human presence?)

Also, he did not recognize a single one of the trees, flowers, and bugs in the scene around him. That was another shock. His survival knowledge would be useless here.

He was confident it would be a *relief* if a thicket parted and a supposedly-extinct plesiosaur stuck its head out. Because that would at least be something from "home". But none of the harmless trees and plants here gave him that relief. He felt as hopelessly alienated as if he had discovered the other side of the moon looked like this.

But that was not what emerged.

It was a girl.

Her long hair was red and silver and was that a combination of armor and a miniskirt she wore?

None of it was practical.

If you included her back into the calculation, she had more exposed skin than red armor. At first, Heivia thought she might be a companion at a jousting tournament for nobles. That was the only logical explanation he could come up with.

But deep down, he did not really care.

There was a young girl in what amounted to a swimsuit in front of

him. And he was somehow borrowing the face of a handsome boy! That meant he could do anything without consequences!! What happens in wherever-the-hell-this-was stays in wherever-the-hell-this-was!!!!!!

So Private Heivia Winchell did not hesitate. He forgot all about his position as a noble, raised his thumb like he was hitchhiking, and gave a beaming smile as he spoke to her.

“Hey!! I don’t know who you are, but how would you like to have the kind of fun only a guy as good looking as me can get away with!?”

…

…

…

“……”

H-huh? This doesn’t look good.

Oh, no. Is she the kind of girl that doesn’t completely let her guard down around a good-looking guy!?

But Heivia had bullet and shells whizzing by on a daily basis, was often exposed to the kicks of his busty silver-haired commander and the cold glares of the Princess, and somehow seemed to find himself blowing up 200,000 masses of steel with his awful friend. It would take a lot for him to lose his composure.

Yes, for example…

It would take seeing a red girl’s right half burst into flames that roared violently as they consumed oxygen.

“G-g-gnyaaahhh!? I’m into a lot of weird shit, but spontaneously-combusting girls is not one of them!!”

Heivia’s fear was directed in a bit of an odd direction, but the girl calmly drew her rapier while half her body burned. The flames crawled up the blade like it had oil coating it.

When taking a history test written by his army of hellish tutors and asked who had invented the light bulb, Heivia was the type to write “The Kappa. Because it glows” with a straight face, but even he

understood something here.

“Death to handsome guys!? That’s not how it’s supposed to work!!”

A large explosion erupted while he was wasting time talking.

Part 4

(Quenser/Academy City)

A nearly 4m pig just stood out too much.

He thought he had lost that brown-haired twintails girl, but he kept running across her afterwards.

“Crap, crap. I’m not sure what scares me more: that twintails girl from hell or me for escaping her…”

“Boo, boo. Flat chests aren’t delicious. I want something fattier!”

The giant pig climbed to the top of a building. It had to be more than 10 stories tall, but it only took the pig an instant. He kicked back and forth between the building wall and a wind turbine pole for a zigzagging path to the roof.

That was incredible, but Quenser was worried.

What was this? Produce 10 or 20 of them and their maintenance base would be in trouble.

“Wh-where did that thing go!? What kind of trickery did it use to escape my teleportation!?”

The pig kept his mouth shut as the girl ran along the road, shouting something in an Asian language.

The girl was plenty strange herself. Quenser had no idea what kind of trick she used, but he had seen her vanish into thin air a few times.

At this point, he had eliminated the possibility of a problem with the pig-faced giant’s senses. They were actually several times better than Quenser’s normal senses. The sense of smell was especially

good, so he felt like he could smell the nape of her neck even from this distance.

(Is this some kind of esper development, or a giant setup meant to look that way? But it's the Faith Organization more than the Capitalist Corporations that likes to give their Pilot Elites that charisma that goes beyond their actual abilities. …Well, this is the Island Nation, so they might have a mixture of different cultures.)

The soft footsteps faded into the distance. Unless that hellish twintails girl was from the bloodline of a killer in a hockey mask, he would not have to worry about her reappearing out of nowhere for a surprise attack. This time, he seemed to have truly lost her.

"Phew."

"Squeal…"

He softly sighed. He rubbed at his back with his giant hands, but he could not feel the zipper anywhere. Was the zipper even still there? From a physical perspective, his answer to that should have been obvious, but Quenser could not bring himself to give an answer. He was afraid what it would be.

And the idiot was not given a chance to sit and think.

He heard another girl's voice.

"Beep beep beep. Beep beep beep beep beep."

It did not matter if she was speaking an Asian language or not. "Beep beep beep" spelled danger no matter where you were from.

(Are you kidding? Is she receiving some kind of mysterious signal and supplying her own sound effect!?)

He did not want to turn around. But he was also afraid to ignore this. This yellow light was enough for him to forget all about the zipper on his back or the lack thereof. And that light would definitely turn either red or green once he turned around.

He felt like someone who had a swarm of hornets in their yard, could not find the basketball-sized nest, went into the house to think about it in peace, and realized they could hear a buzzing from the storeroom.

(I really don't want to look!!)

He had no choice.

The giant gray pig curled up his back and hesitantly turned his head in an extremely human action. He looked over his shoulder to check on reality.

There he found a girl with a very Asian black bob cut, a dead-eyed expression, and a pink track suit that may have been for wearing at home or for wearing when she went out.

"Konnichiwa, bonjour, good afternoon, ni hao. Hm? Good afternoon. Okay, okay."

She tried a few different languages, but his luck ran out when he perked up in response to the familiar English.

Thus spoke the near-future *kokeshi* doll in English:

"A signal is arriving from south-southwest. Yes, it's coming from you."

(Noooooo

(Are the explosives something like instant-set bombs? A lot of them are getting caught in the taller branches instead of hitting the ground. They're exploding way too high up a lot of the-…)

"…Bgwah!?"

The idiot must have earned some divine punishment for acting like an intellectual because one ball of light slipped through the gaps in the branches and fell right on his head. He had been running a second before, but the explosion slammed him to the ground and he bounced higher than he was tall.

Even now the handsome boy was sparkling.

In fact, he was not scorched at all. Something white had grown from his back and protected him like a giant shield.

"Oh…wah!? What the hell!?"

The wing stabbed into the ground, pinning him in midair. Once he had stopped his momentum, he placed his feet on the ground and tilted his head.

(W-was that part of the skin's functionality? This material is so thin and I can move it however I want. I could do anything with this! Mwa ha ha ha ha!!)

He was sick of running away. More importantly, he wanted to give a somewhat harsh punishment to that girl in the revealing armor. With that goal in mind, Heivia looked up, but nothing more happened. He realized he had no idea how to bring out and move that wing. It required using his mind in a different way from moving his arms or legs.

"Dammit, this isn't a cutting-edge smartphone! You can't just omit the thick user's manual!!"

It seemed running away was his only option.

The explosions were more shockwave than fire and thus did not ignite the forest, but there was nothing clean or ecological about this attack. If he hid behind cover, he would simply get eradicated along with it. The mysterious wing had disappeared at some point and, at this rate, he would end up blown to pieces while still borrowing this good-looking face. That nihilistic and handsome smile might just remain on his face while his body weight of flesh

was gathered up and dumped into a coffin.

“Are you goddamn kidding me!?”

His hair and jacket were muddy as he scrambled down a gentle unpaved slope.

This was not an armored vehicle or attack helicopter equipped with a howitzer. To reiterate, he was only up against a human here. A slender girl. The only obvious weapon was the rapier in her right hand, but he could not even begin to imagine how she was using that like rockets were used to level out the land in front of an advancing army.

And…

(She isn’t taking this seriously.)

Heivia gulped inside the handsome shell.

(She’s doing all this and she isn’t even taking it seriously. She’s making no effort to actually pursue me! Is she doing this without really paying attention? How many wars could this girl start!?)

This pairing was not good.

Just as scissors could not beat rock, he had no way of turning this around. Fight or flee, the result would be the same. He would be unilaterally worn down and killed.

(Isn’t there something…someone!? I don’t care what it is! I just need someone who can play paper! Just bring that here right now!!)

The wing from before may have qualified, but he could not use that right now. If you had forgotten your PIN, you could not use your credit card to pay for dinner. Searching the bottom of your bag for some lost money would be more productive.

While exposed to so many explosive flames, Heivia silently prayed and kept running. He had no idea what it was, where it was, what form it took, or how it would help.

That was why he prayed.

He had no plan. But there was a hint of probability and statistics in his reasoning. If he did not reach out his hand, the odds of success would remain at 0%. If he wanted even the smallest possibility, he

had to search for something, even if he could only search at random. Running around searching was the only option.

“Hm?”

His sense of time was so thoroughly out of whack that he was not sure if a second or an hour had passed, but he finally detected a change.

He heard the refreshing sound of running water.

There was a clear stream. It was narrow enough he could probably jump over it with a running start and jumping into it would not be enough to hide him. But he still saw it as an opportunity. He changed course to run alongside the stream. This faint hope slightly numbed some of the fear and exhaustion.

Had water simply seemed like an advantage against fire?

Or had he hoped one of the animals that were bound to gather at a water source would help in some way?

He was not sure.

He just kept running without knowing what exactly he was hoping for.

In the end, it was an issue of statistics and probability.

In other words, his effort into running across some kind of coincidence had transferred him onto a different set of rails.

“Boo?”

He heard some kind of groan.

No, this was human language. It was not just mimicking sounds like a parrot; this was someone speaking with enough intelligence to know what the words meant.

“Why are you all muddy? I know you humans are weak to change, so you’ll get sick if you don’t keep yourself clean. You need to be careful.”

“Wh…what?!”

Heivia was not certain this was what he was looking for, but he still

came to a stop.

A gray pig-faced giant was scooping water into a wooden bucket with a handle, like he was dropping it into a well. Heivia stopped because it was impossible to ignore that nearly-4m height and all that fat situated atop powerful muscles.

(W-wait? There's more of those pig costumes that Quenser wore? But, wait, eh? If that isn't a costume…eh???)

He had not recognized any of the trees in this forest. And he had some serious doubts that the fire pillar girl chasing him was human given what she could do. But this was on a much bigger scale. It felt so very wrong that it overwhelmed his capacity for understanding, split apart his right and left brain, and gave him a headache that threatened to transform that idiot into a genius.

He did not understand any of this.

But this was too much. He felt like the world he believed in was crumbling around him.

(It doesn't matter who wins or loses.)

He instantly made up his mind.

(But there should be an opening if that fire-breathing girl and this giant thing start fighting. I just have to use that to escape! I can't hope for anything more…!!)

"Boo? What's the matter?"

The pig-faced giant remained carefree. This would work. If Heivia just left things as they were, he was fairly certain a battle would begin on its own.

But then he felt movement on his back. That wing was starting to appear again now that he was facing such a threatening being.

"Don't you…"

He heard a resentful voice behind him.

This was the first time he heard that girl's beautiful voice.

"Don't you dare bully Boo Boo, you dumb pretty boyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

But he did not have time to appreciate it.

Before any mystery wings could appear, a blunt weapon covered his borrowed face with enough force to distort the handsome features. Only after hearing an unpleasant noise from his neck and bending backwards did he realize it was the sole of a metal boot.

She had been a decent distance away, but she had filled that gap in an instant.

It took a while before he realized flames had spread out from the red girl's back like wings.

And just before he collapsed, he spotted her underwear as her miniskirt fluttered up from the force of the flying kick. They were fairly lewd for their pure appearance.

And there was one thing he knew he could honestly say this time:

It wasn't my fault!!

Part 6

(Quenser/Academy City)

He wanted to run away.

He wanted to go anywhere else with all his might.

"Nn."

The pig-faced giant flinched back when the bob cut Asian in a pink track suit stared at him with leaden eyes.

But…

"Takitsubo-san, super what are you doing?"

"Ah."

He did not have time to react rationally to the unfamiliar Asian language he heard from directly behind him.

He already knew this city and its residents were dangerous.

So.

“Owahh!?”

Quenser cried out as he turned around. He was not thinking about how the noise would grow distorted within the pig’s body. He also reflexively swiped his arm like he had seen a spider the size of his palm right next to his face

Yes.

He used the full strength of that gray pig-faced giant which rivaled construction machinery.

By the time he felt a chill more in the pit of his stomach than his spine, it was too late.

The gigantic hand hit the short girl not just on the face but on the entire upper body.

It took less than a second.

The girl with a brown bob cut and a knit dress was swept through the air and slammed into the emergency stairs entrance of the water tower behind her. She was sandwiched between the hand and the wall and a spider web of sinister cracks ran through the thick reinforced concrete around her.

Quenser felt like a driver who had hit someone with a giant quarry dump truck and then crashed into a nearby building.

Except…

“Oh, gh… That’s a real super way of saying hello, you pig bastard.”

(She’s talking!? How the hell could she still be alive!?)

Quenser had no idea if this meant he was saved or screwed and he could not seem to control his emotions. If this was not enough, he guessed she could survive a head-on attack from an assault rifle. However it had happened, the knit dress girl was alive. She was not even bleeding. And he felt something other than soft skin on his brutal palm. It was only a few millimeters, but that was still a few millimeters. There was something…yes, like a layer of compressed air there.

“Kinuhata. It seems he only understands English.”

“Ehh? I don’t know where something like this came from, but is that language really that super universal? Well, it doesn’t matter as long as it gets through to him.”

(She did that while unarmed? If she got close enough, she could probably punch a hole in the side of an armored truck…)

Quenser was dumbfounded, but then he heard the track suit girl’s carefree voice.

“More importantly, Kinuhata, are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah. Being this super solid is what’s kept me alive this long. Anyway, Takitsubo-san, is this the guy you were super talking about?”

“Yes.”

“If we made Hamazura deal with this, I bet he’d get a super pig look on his face too. Hah hah!”

The atmosphere relaxed around the cheerfully laughing girl, so it felt like none of it had actually happened. That was bizarre, but it at least meant she was not going to make gray pork skewers at the moment.

“Who would’ve thought that hypothesis would super show up here.”

The girl called Kinuhata viewed the nearly-4m giant with curiosity in her eyes and then she finally switched over to a language Quenser could understand.

“Well, if you don’t want to be super caught up in all the confusion, then come with us. I don’t know who you are or where you’re from, but you don’t want to be super chased around the city in some kind of witch hunt, do you?”

It looked like they could actually hold a conversation.

And he had yet to apologize for hitting her before.

He did not want to leave that dangling over their heads and ruin any chance he had to turn this around in a positive direction. He did not want to lose their help, so he hurriedly opened his mouth.

“S-sorry. My name is Quenser Barbotage. I know it’s hard to believe, but this is some kind of realistic costume. It had a zipper when I put it on, but…”

But he was under so much mental pressure from everything happening here that he had completely forgotten about one trait of this pig-faced bastard. The vibrations of his voice would travel from his gut to the top of his head and come out just like that Asian language he did not understand, similar to how the wavelengths colliding as they echoed through a cave could sound like sobbing.

“Boo. I’m not interested in girls so flat you can’t tell their front from their back. Come back after you’ve had more milk.”

“…”

She smiled.

It was the impeccable smile of an angel.

(Hmm, that should just be random noise, but the look in her eyes tells me she’s made some kind of horrible misunderstanding!!)

“Wai-…”

A surging body rush began before Quenser could say anything more.

Part 7

(Heivia/Ground’s Nir)

“Boo. Beatrice, don’t glare like that.”

“But, Boo Boo, I sense some kind of negative aura from this handsome guy. And the men I’ve met in Ground’s Nir have always been bad news.”

This island seemed to be made as a trial for good-looking guys. The flying kick to the face with the girl’s full body weight behind it seemed to have messed with the costume’s fit because the jacket boy seemed to be smiling oddly as he tilted his head.

“Beatrice, you can’t just beat up handsome strangers because you’re pissed off about the Gate Crushers.”

A sexy white witch was occasionally pushing up her glasses while clinging to the waist of the pig-faced giant named Boo Boo. She may have felt the need to hide behind someone.

“Wow, he really is the picture perfect version of handsome. …And that’s what makes me so skeptical,” said a short-haired girl in green who may have been some kind of priest. “Yes, just like balloon boobs filled with silicone.”

“I assume that was directed at me, but who’s going to feel hurt at the end of the day, Miss Flaaat?”

“Dammit, I so want to sneak up behind that glasses cow, anesthetize her, and stick a liposuction nozzle in her!!”

“Stop that, Armelina. It makes my skin crawl when you get that specific with your grudge!”

“You only have yourself to blame, Filinion.”

“You only have yourself to blame, Filinion.”

“I didn’t do anything! This flaaaat person just attacked me out of jealousy! Is there no justice in this cruel break room!?”

White Witch Filinion moved even further behind the pig and shrank down. Heivia had a thought as he watched her.

(Hold on. Is that pig in the same position as Quenser? If so, there’s no forgiving him. How do these people end up with several teenage girls hanging all over them without putting any effort into it!?)

The handsome mask apparently prevented anyone from picking up on his feelings. The gray pig named Boo Boo used his giant hand to somewhat roughly rub Filinion’s head.

“So who is this, Beatrice?”

“Someone suspicious, so let’s roast him and throw him out.”

“I have to respect how fully you’ve decided to throw out the rule of law here in Ground’s Nir, Beatrice. So what is this? His, um, full-body tights? Aren’t you curious where that came from? It seems different from Magic and I doubt Ground’s Nir could make that kind

of special makeup since it has no petrochemical processing technology, so it feels kind of like some lost technology. And it would be trouble if someone used it to disguise themselves as someone else and sowed confusion while exploring the Labyrinth."

The conversation was finally headed in a constructive direction. Beatrice, Filinion, Armelina, and Boo Boo. Heivia thought about those names that had been brought up so far.

"I was just cleaning up the storeroom when we found a bunch of them and I chose this handsome one because it looked like fun, so I have no clue what any of this is about. Do you all know more?"

"Hey, I don't know if you're just omitting a lot, but that was a terrible explanation. I have no idea what you're trying to say."

"Again, let's fry this sketchy handsome guy and be on our way. My suggestion is dividing his ashes into a few different barrels or bottles and throwing them in a river or in the ocean."

"You'd make that Vampire staying in the ghost ship cry, so let's not, Beatrice. …More importantly, what even is this? You called it special makeup before, but that's not really what this is. It's weirdly lifelike."

Special effects makeup would look really fake outside of the camera frame. For example, the voice would be muffled because the air came out differently, the thick mask's many layers of coloring would have a powerful smell, and it would not sweat no matter how much they moved around.

But this unpleasantly handsome boy showed none of those signs. There was no flaw from any angle, so it felt like having a character from a movie step out of the screen.

"Something like this would be a lifesaver for undercover operations. Oh, but then we might get a bunch of phantom thieves like you see in manga."

"Is it a technological revolution brought on by a Piece?"

"Boo. What does that mean?"

"By mastering Magic in Ground's Nir, we can acquire precise processing methods and chemical compositions that can't be reproduced with the technology back in reality. That data can lead

to breakthroughs in research fields that have reached a dead end, so…"

…Heivia was skeptical that a pig from dreamland could understand all that, but he had crashed into a new barrier himself. Beatrice, that human weapon in red armor, had mentioned "technology back in reality". Then where were they now? Did Ground's Nir somehow not count as reality?

Armelina, the flat-chested green priest, did not hesitate to pinch the distorted handsome cheek.

"This is incredible. It's like a full-face transplant from an SF movie."

"Hold on there, miss. You sure are friendly. As a bust sommelier who understands that large and flat both have their own unique appeal, you're going to make me blush!"

"Ho ho? And which category do I fall under?"

"Agrbrbrh!? Wait, don't pull! You're going to tear it! Is this a dictatorship that can get people to say that white is black!?"

But the fake skin showed no sign of tearing even as Armelina used her full strength. Instead of being pasted on somehow, it was more like it was actually his skin. Where did the costume end and where did the original begin? There was no way to tell.

"Whether it's a breakthrough from a Piece or not, this might be… y'know."

"You think so too, Armelina?"

"Beatrice, did you just not give this any thought at all?" Armelina sighed and tossed out a theory. "Cultivated Muscles. A technology that makes muscle fibers and nerve tissues out of the ever-popular stem cells and uses those as weapon components instead of mechanical parts."

Part 8

(Quenser/Academy City)

Most people would see him as some kind of mascot, but he was still in trouble if they got suspicious. Since he could not walk along the road, Quenser jumped from building to building with the two girls held in his hands. The distance between them and height differences did not matter. The pig's specs were just too high. That Kinuhata girl had beaten him up earlier, but he had not taken any real damage.

And that Kinuhata was happily kicking her legs around while he held her around the waist. He wondered if she liked thrill rides, but that was apparently not what this was about.

"Ohh, jumping from building to building is the dream of everyone who loves super B-movies! I love how you move super quickly from one jump to another like that!! Although I guess this is more like the legit stunts from French movies then the CG-filled Hollywood movies filmed in front of a green screen."

"…"

And he had learned something in this short time.

He could not talk out loud. His voice would echo weirdly through his body (as far as he could tell, anyway) and lead to misunderstandings. But nodding and shaking his head worked fine. With both his hands full, he could not write or gesture, so he decided to simply listen.

"Cultivated Muscles," said excited Kinuhata. "It began as tech to control robots measuring only a few centimeters long. If they were making an aquatic robot that resembled a ray, it's more efficient to use flexible muscle fibers than trying to cram a motor, gears, cylinders, a battery, a control chip, and all sorts of other mechanical parts into the limited space. A report on it said the ray example has actually super reached practical levels in military research. They could apparently get it to follow after any light shined on it."

"Powering robots with muscles allows for designs impossible with motors or cylinders and adding in nerve tissue is the same. If they could reproduce a fish spine, they would probably have a lot more freedom."

"On the other hand, it isn't suited for large weapons. After all, maintenance for biological based tech is super difficult. It needs nutrients, it will weaken without regular exercise, it gets worn out by its own weight, you can't fix a malfunction with pliers or a

wrench, and mold and germs will get to it if you don't keep things sanitary… They would have to have both a mechanical and biological maintenance facility for every base. That would be a super waste to the people who want to reduce costs and confusion by standardizing all the parts between fighter jets."

Quenser had read a paper about this.

If you pursued the mysteries of life, you would end up focused on the micro world. It was difficult to reproduce an insect or fish's routines with LSI, but that effort could be skipped by incorporating the animal's body tissue.

But forcing that result into the macro world would kill the cost-effectiveness and existing tank and fighter technology started seeming better. If you wanted to carry something heavy, steel treads were better than six insect legs. Especially when those legs could not be maintained or stored in a warehouse for years.

Military weapons had to do more than just fight. War could break out at any time. A civilized country needed to be prepared for war during times of peace while also keeping costs low. Cultivated Muscles would die without being regularly fed, would become less effective as they aged, and would have their muscles and tendons snap once scrambled if they did not stretch first, so the logistical planners in business suits were not fond of them, even if the people on the scene were.

(Would all that change if they could be put in cold sleep? No, then they couldn't be used immediately and it would cost a ton just to keep the giant cold storage facility at dozens of degrees below 0 year-round. The country would fall apart from financial issues before the fighting even began.)

Also, bioethical issues cropped up once the life form reached a certain level. Religious groups were beginning to settle on the conclusion that cellular technology that did not use an embryo or fertilized egg was not a problem, but emotional enthusiasts were a different matter. For example, if a quadrupedal killer weapon was developed to include a dog or cat spine, there would probably be passionate opposition to it. And that business suit group needed to remain popular with the public, so they could not ignore those organizations. No one wanted a weapon that would gather the people's hate just by being deployed. Most weapons were designed to look strong and cool for reasons beyond functional beauty.

But.

In that case…

(Then…wait. Does that mean there's an original life form this is based off of?)

That was hard to believe. Cultivated Muscles was a technology that incorporated the muscle fibers and nerve tissue of existing creatures as weapon components. That could not be the whole story. Quenser felt like he had been fused with this instead of simply wearing it. He had no idea what had happened to him, but he could at least predict that this had incorporated something that existed elsewhere.

That meant this was only a part of that creature's ability.

Just how high were the specs of the original one? He had a feeling they could destroy an Object while entirely unarmed.

"*That* might not exist in this world."

The pink track suit girl must have been thinking something similar because she spoke in a flat voice while he held her around the waist.

Was she saying it was the same as the extinct dinosaurs? But what the other girl said next was not what Quenser expected.

"Have you heard the rumors that the Voyager is actually quite close by? It's a super major urban legend on the same level as saying the stars and stripes on the moon are a lie."

Quenser shook his pig head.

"In addition to gathering data on the planets further out than Mars, the Voyager was also an unmanned spaceship super thrown out to the ends of the solar system to contact extraterrestrial life. …Well, it was more of a vault than a ship. It was filled with data about earth's civilizations so it would act as a business card for any aliens. A gold-plated record acted as a collection of the super best of mankind's music and things like that. It was a lot like super showing off how smart and technologically advanced we are in order to make some friends, but it makes you wonder if they'd completely forgotten what Western civilization did during the Age of Discovery. A bunch of alien spaceships could have attacked in order to get what we have."

“…”

“However, there’s a rumor saying the US government has been covering up that the Voyager never made it to the edge of the solar system and was lost before then. And that includes faking the signal being sent back from space. Did they want to hide that their national project had super failed, or had some ‘collector’ caught it in their net quite close by? There are apparently a lot of different theories.”

None of it made much sense to Quenser. For one thing, what was the point of competing theories when the base premise had nothing to back it up?

“And the most super bizarre of those theories is that the Voyager was simply lost. That the US government isn’t covering up the reason; they simply have no way of explaining what happened.”

He did not nod or shake his head here.

Kinuhata continued speaking.

“The Voyager was emitting its signal to convey its gathered data back to earth, but due to some malfunction, it just stopped. …We might not know as much about the solar system as we thought. There might be a ‘hole’ in the world far, far shockingly super closer than we think. That’s the rumor.”

“But there’s nothing to back it up. About half of the supposed evidence is complete nonsense, like all the talk of the shadows of the flag on the moon. And just like with the moon landing, there are people who clearly enjoy spreading falsehoods. That’s all this is.”

“If this was a Hollywood movie, there’d probably end up being a super mothership larger than Manhattan on the other side of the moon☆”

But pink track suit Takitsubo had to admit one thing:

“We might not be able to explain this whole situation without using a source as dubious as that.”

The gray pig stopped on a building roof.

(But,) he thought. (How are we supposed to solve all this?)

Part 9

(Heivia/Ground's Nir)

They checked his back just to be sure. Not for the mysterious wings that would come out sometimes, but for a zipper.

"Boo? What's a zipper?"

"Is this pig good for anything!? Hey, you beautiful young ladies, can't one of you do something about this?"

"Just so you know, I'm keeping track of every time you insult Boo Boo."

"That red one really does scare me! I doubt I'm going to get a nice prize if I gather enough stickers!!"

Heivia trembled as the glasses White Witch circled behind him and tilted her head.

"Hmm, I'm not seeing anything like a zipper."

"Are you sure this is something you're 'wearing'?" Armelina suggested a new theory. "If this is made from Cultivated Muscles that have covered your entire body and synchronized with your fingers and senses, then could it be attached on the cellular level, fusing your nerves and blood vessels together? If so, it would have to be surgically removed."

"Gyaaa

“You need to open your heart more! Someone do something about this mentally locked-down girl!!”

Heivia was overcome by a crawling sensation across all of his nerves, but he could not come to a stop here.

For one thing…

“These…Cultivated Muscles, did you call them? Are they really that simple? A theory and a practical product are entirely different things. It’s not like we can actually cause a big bang.”

Armelina looked troubled.

“I’m not sure what to say when you’re standing there fused with some.”

“Wearing! Say I’m wearing them!! Even if the zipper has disappeared and I can’t check on it myself!!”

“What does it mean that you have no idea what that thing is? Could it be something that arrived from *elsewhere*?”

“Filinion. Unlike data or experience points, transferring physical items is close to impossible.”

“But they can send experience and data, right? So what if someone fully analyzed a DNA map and sent that *somewhere else*?”

“But fully analyzing the human genome doesn’t mean you can just make a perfect copy of someone, does it? I’ve heard even identical twins have different enough fingerprints and irises that they can’t pass biometric scans for each other.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Heivia held out both his hands. “Talkative girls, you’ve completely left this handsome noble behind here. Are you basing all this on some kind of incredible assumption I’m not aware of? To be honest, I’m afraid the answer to this is going to make me question either your sanity or everything I thought I knew about the world.”

“Oh, be quiet, you masked man with a fake smile plastered on your face.”

“I’m handsome on the inside too! Yes, you should count yourself lucky, red girl. If you had seen the true face of Heivia the Ultra

Handsome Genius Noble, your view of the world might just have fallen apart!!”

“Enough nonsense.”

“(H-hey, glasses girl. What is with that scarlet lady? She isn’t responding at all to my attempts to woo her. Is she a lesbian by any chance?)

“Don’t you dare drag me into your indulgent fantasies, twisted smile boy. But Beatrice focuses more on the mental side of things, so she honestly has no interested in anyone but Boo Boo.”

“…”

“Boo?”

Heivia’s twisted handsome face looked back and forth between the nearly-4m pig-faced giant and the slender girl in armor.

“Now I’m really curious about the nighttime logistics of that pairing. I’d like to see it live if possible! I-I fully support your niche fetish that might just break the bed! Gulp!!”

“Hey, fake handsome boy. I’m one thing, but if you sully Boo Boo in your mind, then I’ll just have to disinfect your brain by heating it up to 18,000 degrees.”

“Oh, what’s this? Are you not aware that human proteins are destroyed at a mere 42 degrees…!?”

“You are a genius when it comes to adding fuel to the fire, you know that? If you used that ability properly, you could probably be the kind of online marketing.”

“Don’t say I’m like a panty thief who failed to become a tuxedoed spy, Miss Cool Beauty. …And you have a familiar presence about you. Are you a soldier?”

“Cough, cough!! I am the daughter of an ice cream shop owner in the real world, so I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“Armelina…”

“Acting like that flaaaat chest has ever even met a dairy product is pretty hard to believe.”

Armelina shouted “That’s it!! Let’s take this out back, Beatrice!!” and grabbed at the other girl, so they ignored her.

“No, wait. But, hey, um.”

“Boo. What is it?”

“Could it be…yes, could it be that you all are, um, talking about casually moving between worlds?”

Boo Boo brought a hand to his mouth and tilted his head.

Meanwhile, the three girls readily answered.

Beatrice started.

“Of course. We came here to Ground’s Nir by passing through the Gates on earth.”

“…”

She made it sound so simple.

As simply as saying a device the size of a card was both a phone and a camera.

“You heard me mention Gate Crushers to Beatrice before, right?” said Filinion “Those are some cruel pranksters who go around encasing the Ground’s Nir side Gates in blocks of concrete so no one can go in or out. Well, they might be thinking they can take all of Ground’s Nir’s resources for themselves if they take out all the Gates back to earth except for the one they use.”

Concrete might sound like a symbol of modern construction, but its original form dated back to the Roman era. And in the Island Nation during the Edo period, a method mixed with water to harden it had been widespread under the name “tataki”. So there was nothing odd about coming across it in a fantasy setting.

“We can freely move between ‘our earth’ and Ground’s Nir,” continued Armelina. “So it’s possible you could reach here from ‘another earth’ as well. That would assume the existence of parallel worlds, though.”

Part 10

(Quenser/Academy City)

Let's spell this out clearly.

There were two major problems facing Quenser:

- Could the giant pig made from Cultivated Muscles be removed?
- This did not seem to be in the same region as the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, so how could he get back?

He wanted to return.

Return to his original location and return to his original self.

Those were the hurdles he had to clear and the problems he had to solve. But…

"There is a paradox here," said pink track suit Takitsubo. "The cells on which your Cultivated Muscles are based do not seem to be 'here'. That means the pig itself functions as a powerful contradiction to history. It is probably from a timeline that does not exist here. We were never supposed to meet."

They had stopped on top of a building, so Quenser had let go of the girls to free up his hands. There was no chalk, but he could scrape letters out onto the concrete with his fingernails. Needless to say, this was because using his mouth would cause his voice to echo complexly through the gray pig and come out as something entirely different.

"Fully agreeing with her cringeworthy delusions would probably get her to lower her guard, but I'll pass since I'm not in the mood. There was a girl like that in my safe country. She wore a weird eyepatch and wrapped bandages around her hand. She looked easy enough to win over, but then she'd probably become a stalker, so no one went for it."

"Mouth open or closed, you are genius when it comes to making girls super boil over."

"You mean my very presence causes the core of your body to

overheat? Not to worry, honey, I don't mind a bit if you dirty your underwear."

"That right there is what I'm talking about, you damn moron." Knit dress Kinuhata breathed an exasperated sigh. "But I super agree that your presence is causing some kind of paradox. This problem starts with you and I don't think we can start to solve it as long as you're around."

"Oh, c'mon! Don't start talking like you want to murder me! All I did was some sexual harassment!"

"And that alone is worth super murdering you!! Don't think you're so privileged that the rules of society don't apply! Besides, murdering you would still leave your corpse and not even our most skillful means of disposing of that would completely eliminate the fact that we murdered you. In that case, I don't think it would solve anything."

"Don't talk about murder and disposing of corpses like that. You're a scary girl."

"You only just noticed? We're from an underworld team called Item. A corpse or two is super nothing to get worked up about."

"Let's not start bragging about corpses. There are some people in our unit that will sometimes take photos of the mutilated enemy soldiers blown away by our Object in the name of journalism or keeping records of the war, but they're grinning like crazy the whole time. You can just tell it's giving them a boner. Otherwise they'd never take 400 photos of dark red masses so torn up you can't tell the head from the ass."

"Don't throw me into the same category as those super perverts! And now I'm starting to question what kind of life you come from!!"

"Kinuhata. Get back on topic."

"Ahem. …Anyway, to solve this super peacefully, we need to shove you back in through the 'hole' you arrived from. That kind of 'rollback' seems like the shortest route to me. Once the central paradox is gone, the distortion to history should disappear too. Y'know, like changing a timeline with a time machine and then returning it to normal."

"You sure have a lot to say on this topic (lol)."

“Did you have to go out of your way to right the ‘lol’? It pisses me off. …But to be honest, I find this super weird myself. I bet ‘our usual selves’ would be more doubtful when faced with this kind of crazy theory.”

“You are always like this, Kinuhata. Stop deluding yourself.”

“…Did you say something, busty track suit girl?”

At any rate…

“Return to my original world, huh?”

“But you have to make sure you get the order right. You aren’t ‘going’ to your world. You’re ‘returning’ to it. Get that wrong and it could super lead to an irreversible mistake.”

“? Explain.”

“This isn’t about continuing forward; it’s about rolling things back along the same steps. Let’s say you bought a rice ball on sale for 100 yen at a convenience store, but the clerk punched it into the register wrong and super asked for 150 yen. Even if you find 50 yen on the ground after leaving, that won’t change the original payment record.”

“What are yen? Is that Island Nation money???”

“I’m going to ignore that and super keep going. To correct history, you can’t pick money up off the ground; you have to talk to the clerk and have the transaction reentered into the register. You’re down 100 yen either way, but you can’t stray from the original path.”

…Did that mean he could not just take the shortest route back to the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion? Quenser did not want to remain a gray pig forever. He was skeptical of all this paradox talk, but if he could make it so the Cultivated Muscles had never existed, similar to correcting history with a time machine, then he could remove it even if it had fused with him. Hopefully anyway.

But what exactly had happened to him and Heivia? If they did not understand that, they could not retrace their steps in reverse.

(But there’s more to this.)

Inside the gray pig…no, while feeling like he had become the gray pig, Quenser had a question.

(Is my knowledge enough to reach the right answer? For example, where did Heivia end up and what has he seen?)

Part 11

(Heivia/Ground's Nir)

"Share your knowledge? You can probably do that."

The glasses witch named Filinion readily answered Heivia's serious question.

"Wait, wait, wait. Surely you have to think about it more than that!!"

"Putting on airs isn't going to help." She remained nonchalant. "You might be confused about how this works. It's the Gate equipment that's complex, not passing through them. Well, there is a custom of restricting travel by registering your smartphone with a particular Gate, but you seem to have skipped that part when you came here."

"How should I know? This might be normal to you, but it's all new to me."

"Boo… I also don't really get it when the humans start talking about confusing stuff like the Gates. It just looks like they're messing with a bunch of little buttons and stuff."

Boo Boo and Heivia shook hands as kindred spirits and Beatrice rubbed her index finger against her temple.

"To be honest, it's you passing through the Gates without authorization that makes no sense. If you didn't use some kind of hacking tool, then maybe you just so happened to slip through a vulnerability," she said. "But even if we can't operate that Gate like we want, it wouldn't hurt to figure out where it is. Whatever you might be thinking, the Gates are general terminals for data management, not just holes. We look like we do because of the preparations we made in the Introduction Making."

“Meaning?”

“Leave the data with the Gate and you can send it to the other side, assuming they’re in contact on their end. Voice would probably be the fastest method.”

It may have been more like sending a prerecorded message than having a real-time conversation.

“Hey, wait. That means I can send stuff to Quenser, but I can’t get anything back. I mean, it’s better than nothing, but it still feels like just waiting around.”

“Hmm.” Armelina thought for a while. “Then why not have them send data back?”

“Are you going to give him three girls with nice bodies (ha) to show him how it’s done? He might just cautiously observe the Gate and have no idea how to operate it.”

“Then send him that information too. …And did you just laugh there? Mind telling me what that was about?” the green Fighter Priest was extremely casual about it all. “You can include instructions on sending data along with a report on your situation. It might be more work, but you could also create a conversational flowchart. Make it naturally answer all the questions that…what was his name? Well, that your partner would have while gathering data. Then we don’t have to mess with the Gate on that end.”

“We should probably add in some kind of authentication. If we send this to just anyone, we could be indiscriminately spreading strange data among the people on the other side.”

That was when the three of them stopped speaking.

The idea of an invasion through data may have seemed like a serious threat to them. It just made Heivia think they were like the Information Alliance.

Boo Boo alone tilted his head. He hated to admit it, but Heivia found he was more like Boo Boo.

“Anyway.”

As if to bring an end to those thoughts or to break through an invisible jinx, Beatrice spoke up.

“We first need to search for a suspicious Gate that’s been newly constructed. There has to be at least one that connects your world to here, but there might be more. You can walk the perimeter of Ground’s Nir in just three days, so it shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“It’s possible you were the only one to travel between worlds and your friend is still in that storeroom.”

But that also meant the tunnel connecting Ground’s Nir with the 37th might not be the only one. There could also be tunnels connecting Ground’s Nir to other worlds.

Gates did not open on their own. Someone had to construct them.

“Even if your partner was sent to another world, he’ll be looking for any way of getting back. He wouldn’t be able to bear just sitting and waiting, so there’s no way he would overlook even the slightest change. We can only pray he’s searching for the Gate too. Even if he’s hesitant to pass through it, he would still want to know where it is.”

Part 12

(???/???)

And.

Those boys exchanged words somewhere.

Part 13

(Quenser/Academy City)

“…”

In his gray pig form, Quenser once more looked around the city of skyscrapers and wind turbines.

He now had a starting point to figure out this jumbled mess of a puzzle. It was like having a corner piece to start putting together the jigsaw puzzle. Even the smallest foothold would allow him to reach the next one. He could see that chain reaction before him.

He could figure this out.

He was sure of it now.

The situation felt like utter chaos when viewed as a whole, but if he broke it down into smaller pieces, it was not a hopeless problem. It was challenging, but he could solve it. That was how it felt to him now.

There were three worlds.

The maintenance base zone of the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

Academy City.

Ground's Nir.

There were many questions, but he could work through those by figuring out what came from what worlds. So he had to think about which world could solve each problem and which ones could not. That would give him the path needed to return instead of continuing forward.

Part 14

(Heivia/Ground's Nir)

The handsome boy took a deep breath and cleared his thoughts deep within a forest full of never-before-seen species.

Heivia and Quenser had been split apart. They were in different places and faced with different problems. On their own, they might have been unable to clear the hurdle before them.

But things had changed.

Now that they had shared their information, they could view their problem from a higher dimension. It was a third-person perspective, like seeing a movie or reading a novel. So they could do it. They could solve the supposedly unsolvable problems, open the supposedly unopenable doors, and find the supposedly unfindable culprit.

Were they prepared?

Because they only had one shot at this.

Part 15

(???/???)

- Which of the three worlds had the original cells for the gray pig been taken from?
- Which of the three worlds had the original cells for the handsome boy been taken from?
- Which of the three worlds fought wars on enough of a daily basis to eliminate the downsides of the Cultivated Muscles and bring them to a practical level?
- Which of the three worlds had the technology to travel between worlds?
- Which of the three worlds had initially tried to mess with one of the others?
- And lastly, which of the three worlds was the culprit in?

Part 16

(Quenser/Academy City)

“It all started in the Boo Boo World. That’s for sure.”

“H-huh? Boo Boo???”

“…”

Kinuhata and Takitsubo were unsure how to react when all this was suddenly thrown at them. But Quenser continued scraping words out on the ground.

“After all, that’s the only place with the technology that lets them connect worlds with what they call Gates. I don’t know the overall level of civilization in that world, but in that one aspect, they have the advantage. My world and this world wouldn’t be able to do it so easily.”

But.

However.

“That doesn’t mean the culprit is from the Boo Boo World. Some things wouldn’t make sense if they were.”

Part 17

(Heivia/Ground’s Nir)

“The bottleneck here is this weird skin you called Cultivated Muscles,” said Heivia while wearing that handsome skin. “There are two versions: the handsome boy from Index and the pig-faced giant from Boo Boo. If it was just the latter, we could say it was prepared in advance and then the culprit messed with the Gate to come to my world, but the handsome skin gets in the way of that. There’s no explaining it.”

“Hold on. Are you saying…?”

The handsome skin nodded at red armored and miniskirted Beatrice.

“Yes. It started with someone from this Boo Boo World. …But they failed. They connected the Gate and came to my world, but I’m guessing they didn’t stand a chance there.”

Thinking about it, it was obvious.

Things might be different with each world's special abilities added in, but in pure physical fights, Heivia's world was the most dangerous. They had masses of nuke-resistant armor with main cannons powerful enough to blow each other away in a single shot. Those Objects were scattered all over the world. It had such a strong stench of death hanging over it that it almost seemed darkly humorous. He could picture the look on the would-be invader's face when they first ran across one of those. If you could not overcome each individual death without making it into some kind of beautiful story, you could never get by in that world.

"And when one side fled back home, it was time for the other side to go on the offensive," said Heivia. "I don't know if they couldn't close the Gate they had opened or if it was analyzed over a short period of time. Whatever the case, someone from my world attacked Ground's Nir. Now, what would the 'original cause' do? They already knew far too well that they could not beat this opponent in a fight…so they avoided a fight. They fled to somewhere other than Ground's Nir or my world."

"You mean…somewhere we haven't seen yet?"

"Yes. It was probably the world that Quenser was dragged to: Academy City." Heivia slowly took a breath. "That means they've moved back and forth between two worlds with Ground's Nir in the center. And the Cultivated Muscles are based on the cells they acquired doing that. Simply put, they were souvenirs of their world invasions."

Part 18

(Quenser/Academy City)

"The 'original cause' is somewhere in this world. In Academy City. But they didn't use the Cultivated Muscles," wrote out Quenser. "And both the completed Cultivated Muscles were found in the storeroom of the maintenance base being used for a joint exercise. They had already obtained two types of cells and cultivated them. …That means whoever had made them had already returned to their original world: the world full of Objects that I'm from."

Kinuhata still did not seem to understand, but this was not something that could be cleanly explained with just one world. It was the mixture of worlds that had created the paradox in the first place.

“So to super look at it in reverse…”

“The first step is figuring out what happened to the ‘original cause’ who fled from Ground’s Nir to Academy City. Because if they’re alive, we need to take them back.”

“…And what if they’re already super dead?”

“It’s a possibility, but we have to hope that isn’t the case. Only living humans can pass through a Gate. You can’t take back a corpse and you were saying a death would continue to cause a paradox even if the corpse was disposed of. We would be stuck in that case.”

But even if he was afraid to find the answer, he could not do anything until he checked on it.

He had to capture the ‘original cause’ who was somewhere in Academy City. Then he had to go to Ground’s Nir and regroup with Heivia. After that, all three of them had to return to the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. If they then sent the ‘original cause’ back to Ground’s Nir, they would have untangled all the thread.

The person who had created the Cultivated Muscles was in the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. Otherwise, they would never have hidden that biological equipment in that storeroom. And since they had been sent to other worlds as soon as they put those on, the Gate was probably opened in that storeroom as well.

That meant they did not need to think about the culprit who had escaped. They had already returned to their original world. In fact, they had to settle this before that person wandered elsewhere.

That would leave one last task.

After it was all over, they just had to find that culprit and punch them. Luckily, Quenser had more than enough arm strength at the moment.

“Okay, let’s think about the problem at hand.” For some reason, knit dress Kinuhata raised her hand before speaking. “Do you have

any super hints where this ‘original cause’ might be?”

It was true finding a single person in this large city would be extremely difficult. And at the moment, it was unclear if they were even still alive.

But Quenser wrote something out at his feet.

“I have an idea.”

“What is it…?”

“You must have been given some kind of knowledge to make it this far. Y’know, about the Cultivated Muscles, paradoxes, and other worlds. Where did you get that from?”

“Well…”

“Nn. There’s someone who knows all about those things.”

“I see. Then that’s our ‘original cause’,” declared the pig-faced giant. “Could an outsider…no, could anyone who only knows of a single world have knowledge like that? They probably sent you after me to find out what kind of pursuit had been sent after them. …Show me where they are. Let’s end this.”

Part 19

(Heivia/Ground’s Nir)

“To be honest, all we can do is wait,” said Heivia in his handsome disguise deep in the forest.

If their guesses were correct, then the “original cause” was where Quenser was. Fretting about it would not accomplish anything on Heivia’s side. They could only trust that the other side reached the same conclusion.

He took an optimistic view.

But just then…

“…?”

Boo Boo was the first to look around.

Then Heivia noticed something, held his breath, and slowly crouched down.

Finally, Beatrice and Filinion voiced a question.

“What? All the wild birds are taking flight?”

“Shh. It seems one of the Gates is activating. But this behavior is unusual…”

“…”

It was not Quenser. It was far too soon for that. Nor was it the “original cause”. After fleeing from Ground’s Nir, they would have no real reason to return now.

Then who else could it be?

Who else had the ability to pass between worlds?

“…This is not good,” muttered the handsome skin. “Tch. Is the culprit coming back after returning to the maintenance base zone!? We have to send everyone back in order, so we can’t have them wandering all over the place!!”

“What are you going to do?”

“We’ll just have to shove them back through!! If we don’t know where they’ve gone, we’ll have no way of repairing this!”

It sounded like he was arguing based on emotion, but Heivia the Chicken could be surprisingly calculating at times like this.

“And you said these Gates can only carry naked humans and memories or knowledge, right? Our world doesn’t have any magic or esper powers that let you say abracadabra and blow up a tank. Whoever it is that shows up, they’re nothing to be afraid of when they can’t bring a single knife or bullet with them. In fact, it would be safer to take them out immediately before they can find a blade or club to arm themselves with!”

“U-umm…”

“What is it, cow cutie? I appreciate the thought, but this isn’t the time to be hitting on me!!”

“Call me a cow again and I’ll melt that face off of you with sulfuric acid. Anyway, if what you were saying is true, then this culprit not only beat up the invader from our world but also pursued them back to Ground’s Nir. …D-doesn’t that mean they have some kind of trick that let them control something more powerful than our Magic?”

“…”

“Besides, if they were going to show up completely unarmed, would all the birds take flight in an ominous hint of approaching danger? This is more like what you would except in a kaiju movie!!”

“O-o-oh, hell!!!???”

By the time the idiot yelled, it was too late.

Something frightening descended upon the depths of the forest.

The trees of the forest were snapped like matchsticks at the appearance of what looked more like a mountain than a hill.

But a mountain would not have more than 100 cannons attached to a 50m ball of steel.

“Wh-wha-wha-wha…?”

Only flesh-and-blood humans and data could pass through a Gate.

Faced with a violation of that rule, Filinion tearfully backed away, tripped over a tree root, and fell on her butt. Her glasses slipped down, but she did not bother fixing them as she shouted at the top of her lungs.

“What the hell is that!?”

Heivia gulped. Not because he could not identify it. No, the deadly tension filling his body came from knowing the answer all too well.

“The Plasma Horn.” He spoke its name. “Why is the 16th’s cutting-edge Second Generation showing up here when it was supposed to be part of the joint military exercise!?”

Part 20

(Quenser/Academy City)

As its name suggested, Academy City was a city full of schools.

The person they were looking for boldly called themselves the Information Broker, which made them sound about as believable as Nessie.

“They apparently work out of Public Minamino High School’s Electronic Newspaper Club. Of course, that’s a super stereotypical dummy organization, their student ID is fake, and we didn’t look too deeply into it as part of the give-and-take relationship between fellow underworld workers. If they were working with Anti-Skill or Judgment, there would be a super lot of wireless signals surrounding them. Whether they want it or not, compliance rules affect everyone equally. But for our purposes, it only matters that they aren’t a collared dog working undercover.”

Once they went there, Quenser found it to be an odd place. There was a school building. And a schoolyard. There was even a gym and pool. But there was no one there. It was not just that they had moved inside for classes. There was no sign of life over the entire school grounds. Almost like an abandoned hospital wrapped in the cold darkness of late night.

The gray pig did not want to set foot inside so suddenly, so he quietly groaned and viewed it from a distance. The pink track suit girl must have picked up on his doubt from that.

“It’s a diorama school…”

“Think of it like the school version of a model room. They super set up a bunch of classrooms as exhibition rooms. This city has around 2.3 million people and 80% of them are some kind of student. With that many schools, there’s a super high demand in some unique areas. There are even specialist stores for the pointers and magnets teachers use in class.”

“Wow, Academy City has taken the schoolteacher fetish to a whole new level… But they can add some extra data onto the network to make it a secret base, huh? If they have the visitor schedule, they wouldn’t have to worry about running into anyone in such a large school.” Quenser crouched down in his giant body and wrote out the words on the asphalt with his fingernails. “But if we know where they are, we can get to work. Let’s settle this before they catch wind of this and try to flee elsewhere.”

“Ah, wait. We need to super check for traps first! You might be able to see simple tripwires, but the grim reaper has tons of invisible feelers he can use: IR, ultrasound, EM, etc.”

“Don’t worry.” Quenser was not just being hopeful. “There’s none of that here. I can just tell when I’m viewing the world through this head.”

Kinuhata had pulled out a cellphone more sensitive than human eyes or ears, so a stiff smile froze on her face. She looked back and forth between the electronic device in her hand and the gray pig’s eyes.

“And I doubt a small explosion is going to do much to this skin. We don’t have time, so I’ll go first and you can follow after.”

“Kh… An intellectual defender like me can’t let this simplistic mass of muscles protect her. Let’s get going, Takitsubo-san! I’ll super show you what Offense Armor can do!!”

Quenser did not really understand, but those two cleared the way while absentminded Takitsubo calmly followed after them. Since it was based on a school, the building was open from every direction, but they still targeted the faculty entrance around back.

“Heh hehh. A school, a terrorist, and a model school. That means I can go super all out without worrying about damaging things!”

“Kinuhata. You should still try to not damage the model rooms.”

But the pink track suit girl showed no sign of actually trying to stop her. That was workers in the underworld for you.

But as Quenser had said, there were no traps. The back door was unlocked, so the facility must have been running at this time. That meant at least the manager who had the keys would be in the giant model school. Quenser wanted to make sure they were not caught in the battle.

The school building looked stereotypical from the outside. It was the rectangle of reinforced concrete anyone would picture in their heads, but the inside was quite chaotic. The hallway was made of calm-colored linoleum, but the doors lining it were all different. The color, the shape of the windows in them, and whether they were sliding or hinged varied from door to door.

When he peeked through the windows, he found the floor, wallpaper, and everything else was different from classroom to classroom. Some had wood flooring and some were tiled like a chess board. One had a blackboard hanging on a traditional wooden wall and another had all white walls for projecting videos on. Some had boxy chairs and desks while others had streamlined shapes that made them look like melted cheese

The highlight was the special classroom zone. Seeing all the different varieties of infirmary lined up in a row made his head spin. He could not imagine what you were supposed to base a decision on.

The pig was nearly four meters tall, so his head came close to scraping against the ceiling as he walked along.

He knew their destination. There were too few people in this building. Even so, it was probably too quiet for human ears to pick up on, but this pig-faced giant was different. Their target's movements sounded like a shout echoing through a cave.

(The south corner of the third floor.)

Perhaps for private school customers or to create a barrier free environment for wheelchairs, there were several varieties of elevator lined up next to the stairs. They ignored those and climbed the stairs. As they approached the destination floor, Quenser just about laughed out loud despite all the work taken to get here.

They were in the exhibition zone for club rooms. That meant it would be obvious where the Information Broker was hiding. They may have liked roleplaying.

The three of them walked down the hallway and stopped in front of a certain door.

It was labelled "Electronic Newspaper Club".

The gray pig and the knit dress girl exchanged a nod and then kicked the door down together. With a loud sound, the metal door bent and flew inwards, but the person inside did not even flinch as the giant makeshift shuriken flew right past them.

It was a girl in a sailor uniform whose dark eyes were beautiful but hinted at some kind of sticky emotion. Her black hair was tied in a single braid and her skirt reached below her knees, but that was not

enough to hide her individuality. Quenser's battlefield experience, Kinuhata's nose for the underworld, and Takitsubo's mysterious inspiration told them something about her.

…Those were the eyes of a killer.

"So we super meet again."

Kinuhata began in English and that set a precedent. The other girl responded in kind.

"Oh, isn't this nice. But I thought *not* look too deeply into each other's personal information was the polite thing to do."

"Really? When did you learn about this world's rules? I wish I was that super passionate about learning."

"…"

The braid girl looked to the pig-faced giant instead of Kinuhata who instantly continued the provocation.

She was afraid he was an assassin from some unfamiliar world who had arrived here via Ground's Nir. But that meant nothing to Quenser. He just had to make her take responsibility by sealing up the hole she had opened.

So he spoke.

"I only want to send you back. And if you won't cooperate, then I'll just have to beat you up until you can't move and carry you back. So which is it gonna be!?"

"Boo! Long hair, beautiful black hair. I want to smell it, feel it in my hand, and then strip naked, wrap myself in it, and go to sleep! Pant, pant!!"

……

The atmosphere froze over.

It had been a while, so this had completely slipped his mind. When he tried to talk like normal, the damn pig's body would cause it to echo complexly and produce a different wavelength that may or may not have had any meaning.

And since he did not understand this Asian language, he had no

idea what it was saying.

But the girl's reaction made it clear he had stepped on some kind of landmine.

Whether from anger or something else, her entire face grew bright red. She held her own shoulders and backed away.

"This was supposed to be serious! So very serious!! This is the biggest crisis of my life…!"

(Hold on. Wait. Why are Takitsubo and Kinuhata glared at me and clenching their fists? I don't want this to turn into a three-against-one battle with me as the one!!)

The braid girl grabbed a strange object that had been leaning against the wall. It was made of silver. It had a handle as long as mop's and the end contained a crystal ball colored gray with a bluish murkiness to it. The bizarre weapon could be interpreted as a spear, a staff, or a hammer.

Quenser felt a chill because he could not even imagine what that weapon would do. It was hard to decide how to dodge.

And the moment of truth arrived.

The murky crystal ball glowed palely.

"Hahhhh…!!"

For some reason, the braid girl's sailor uniform burst apart from within. The braid that seemed to symbolize her disguise came apart on its own and spread out.

Quenser once more forgot what would happen and cried out.

"Make up your mind! Are you supposed to be modest or an exhibitionist!? And you can't exactly blame me after you did this!"

"Squeal. Stripping you is supposed to be my job! Doing it all at once like that is such a waste."

Not even two seconds later, metal armor appeared out of thin air and equipped itself to the girl's body.

(Two seconds is pretty short but surprisingly long. You can really see everything in that time.)

Quenser managed to calm down after crossing that hill.

It was gray with a bluish murkiness. The armor completely covered her upper body, but the bottom only formed a miniskirt that stopped at the base of her thighs. Was that supposed to be a way of securing as much mobility as possible? The hair itself also became a murky gray tinged with blue.

“Thorbjorg joins the battle.”

As soon as she named herself, the bluish-gray girl swung her silver staff horizontally. The wall next to Quenser exploded and rushed toward him.

Part 21

(Heivia/Ground’s Nir)

The Plasma Horn.

The Second Generation Object of the Legitimacy Kingdom’s 16th Mobile Maintenance Battalion.

In addition to the H-shaped static electricity propulsion device directly below the spherical main body, it had a halo-like ring on the back. Twelve cylindrical plasma boosters were arranged on the ring like on a clock’s face, giving the Object the ability to take instant evasive action. The main cannons were located on the very front of the spherical main body. The three low-stability plasma cannons formed the corners of an equilateral triangle. But rather than firing them individually, they were situated close enough together that firing all three caused the plasma blasts to interfere with each other and trigger a massive explosion on any coordinate within range.

If their focus weakened, its penetrative power would drop, but that also meant it would spread over a wider area and be harder to dodge. After roasting the enemy Object’s surface enough to dull its movements, it would focus the blast to a single point to punch through a weak point. It was known as a bottomless bog because there was no escape once you were caught in its ideal pattern.

But the Plasma Horn had a flaw. And that flaw was the reason why it had not been nominated as the king of Object destruction despite all of its successes in battle.

…While roasting the enemy Object, it would also kill the enemy soldiers. That was impossible to avoid when firing beams of heat measuring hundreds of meters and scattering shockwaves to heat up an Object's nuke-resistant surface. That was why it was known as a leading candidate for the most inhumane weapons. If not for its many successes, its entire strategic theory would have been thrown out.

Simply put, it was the worst possible opponent here.

"H-how did that giant thing get through the Gate…?"

Filinion was still on her butt and with her glasses slipping below her teary eyes, but they had more important things to worry about.

It had detected them.

As a chicken with excellent survival skills, Heivia shouted from the handsome face's mouth.

"Not good. If we're here on the surface, just the residual heat will be enough to kill us! Is there a cliff, a canyon, a cave, or anywhere at all we can get underground? In less than 10 seconds!?"

That was obviously an unreasonable request.

Heivia himself did not actually think they would find such a convenient landmass.

And even if there was a cave right in front of them and they ran inside, the expansion of air from that dreadful heat would mercilessly reach them inside. This really was the worst possible opponent.

The Plasma Horn's three main cannons slowly turned their way in unison. Whether it was a focused shot or a scattering one, a single blast would burn down the forest, vaporize the ground, and turn it all to plasma.

Or it should have.

However.

Just as the unstoppable plasma was fired, it unnaturally curved upwards…and…away???

Only one of them had done anything at all. Beatrice, the red armored girl, had pulled something like a rapier from her hip.

That was all, and yet she had diverted a blast that could destroy an Object. After flying quite a ways up into the air, the three lines mixed together and produced an explosion, but that high up in the air, it only dazzle their eyes and stung their skin. The white clouds were unnaturally torn away, but that was all. The grim reaper's inescapable scythe had failed to reap Heivia's head.

"Wh-what? What just happened?"

It was now his turn to be befuddled.

Meanwhile, Beatrice seemed to recite something with her back turned.

"Blossom, great flower. Reveal the seven trees."

The scenery changed. It was all wrapped in illusory flames. Their surroundings – including the Plasma Horn so far away – were contained within seven giant walls of flame. They almost looked like tall eyes and they partitioned off a space into something like a cage or an arena.

The Plasma Horn must have been equally puzzled. It fired its main cannons twice more, but they still veered upwards or withered away into nothing before traveling far.

Heivia had no explanation for any of it.

Filinion said something while still on her butt and holding her white witch's hat down with both hands.

"O-oh, honestly. There's her obsession with excessive firepower again. This is why Beatrice can't protect her frail healer even though she's *supposed* to be our vanguard. I single stray blast could blow me into a million pieces!!"

"What is that? Are you saying that red girl did this!? These are low-stability plasma cannon blasts that can punch through Object armor!!"

“Yeah, I figured it had to be using something like that since you said it was called the Plasma Horn. Looks like I was right.” Beatrice spoke casually without even looking back. “I’m a Holy Swordswoman who has gathered 14,000 types of Fire Element Magic. …Now, you can’t measure fire’s mass but you can see it and it can push at other objects. So what is it? It isn’t a solid, a liquid, or a gas. It’s a fourth state of matter. In other words, plasma. Right?”

“Wha-…?”

“Then again, I can’t directly control everything we call a plasma. For example, lightning or an aurora. If so, I’d have control over 99% of the universe. The Element of fire is a large category. …But that doesn’t do damage with a high-voltage electric current like a stun gun. It burns the surface using intense heat. So the plasma is being created for the same purpose as fire, right?”

This was extraordinary.

Heivia could not accept it even after he had it explained to him.

He doubted a strict look at the physics behind it would hold up.

But that was why it kind of made sense to him. It was that nonsensical power that the Plasma Horn had wanted. The 16th put more effort into things like excavating historical ruins than firefights. If the occult they had dreamed of showed up in front of them in a physical form, they would likely find it pretty exciting. To the point that they would forget their duty to report it to their superiors and try to take it for themselves.

They had done whatever it took to get it.

And that included messing with the basic structure of the Plasma Horn.

“…Cultivated Muscles.”

“?”

“The Object’s signals transmission system must use nerve tissue and lymph fluid taken from the Pilot Elite and cultivated from there. By equipping the machine with a part of their own body, they tricked the Gate into thinking the entire Object was a human body. If they really wanted your Magic, I wouldn’t put it past them to go that far.”

Heivia himself had thought the handsome skin had passed through the Gate with him because it was his possession. But that was not it. Beatrice's group had already stated that only your own body and knowledge or experiences could pass through the gate, so any physical items would be difficult.

In that case, the Gate had to have been tricked somehow. He did not know if this was a prize brought back from another world or if it was a test case made before doing the same thing with the Object. But this told him one thing for sure. He shuddered at the thought, but he and the handsome boy really were seen as a single being with no division between them.

…Of course, the 16th would not have understood everything from the beginning. They must have fought back against an invader from Ground's Nir, followed them through the opened hole, and then run tests to see what could travel between worlds. Some volunteers may have died before they used the actual Elite or they may have disappeared never to be heard from again. If they had tried to take advantage of this without understanding how it worked, that kind if trial and error would have had to happen at some point.

And they had succeeded.

This was an Object made to invade another world. No concept weapon in history had ever been so twisted.

The countless cannons on the monster's spherical main body audibly moved.

"It won't just be plasma this time. It's going to use railguns, coilguns, rapid-fire beam cannons, and laser beams that travel at the speed of light. A single defense isn't going to work here."

Heivia warned them, but none of them changed their behavior. Not Beatrice, not Filinion who got up and brushed off her butt, not Armelina who raised her metal staff, and not Boo Boo who reached for his waist and pulled out a 2m mass that could be mistaken for a log or a steel beam.

And even as he warned them, Heivia had another thought.

If this was enough to crush them and existing strategies could sweep them away, then the 16th and the Plasma Horn would not have been so attracted by their power that they strayed from the normal path.

“Boo.” The pig-faced giant made it sound like the most normal thing in the world. “We can’t let them burn down the forest. Let’s end this.”

Part 22

(Quenser/Academy City)

When the wall next to him exploded and crumbled down toward him, Quenser knew he would have died in his normal state. Sticking explosives in a pile of rubble, hiding behind cover, and hitting the enemy soldiers with a downpour of stones was a method he had used frequently himself.

But he was an extraordinary gray pig at the moment.

“!!”

With a short breath, he made a backhand blow with his giant fist. He was able to react in time. He felt a chill at his own frightening kinetic vision and reflexes and he sent the scattershot of rubble flying in the opposite direction to protect Kinuhata and Takitsubo.

Or that was his intention.

But when the crumbled and scattering rubble contacted his wrist, it wrapped around his hand. In fact, it was no longer a solid. It was sticky, gray…

(What is this? Cement!?)

“This is super bad. Is that her esper power? Either way, get your hand out of there!!”

He did not have time to listen to Kinuhata’s warning to the end.

The thick skin of his borrowed hand felt the sizzling heat of pressing your palm against a heated grill. But heat was not something that just happened. There had to be a chemical phenomenon that produced it.

(…Doesn’t concrete produce heat when it hardens…?)

Then he realized why the knit dress girl was so concerned. Concrete was not unique in that regard. All matter changed volume when converting between a gas, a liquid, or a solid.

Intense pain came from the gray pig's hand, like it was being crushed by rapidly hardening concrete.

"Ghhh!!"

He clenched his teeth, swung down his fist with enough force to crush a nearby steel desk, and broke the rehardening concrete off of his hand.

"Oh, how lovely. A normal human's bones would have shattered like a glass dropped on the floor."

Thorbjorg giggled.

But Quenser did not understand. What had that been? The hardening of concrete was supposed to be irreversible, so it could not be returned to the soft cement afterwards. Had she created some strange new chemical that did that?

"No. That is an esper power."

"Don't state the wrong answer with such confidence. This is what we call Magic."

Either way, it was abnormal.

The pure destructive power was not the problem. Even with metal Objects in the forefront, the military still placed a lot of trust – bordering on religious faith – in reinforced concrete. Someone like this could ruin important transportation points like sturdy bridges and tunnels or important bases located in fortresses or underground nuclear shelters.

Thorbjorg took her spear or staff with a large crystal ball on the end and she raised it straight up.

Quenser naturally followed it with his eyes and he saw something there: something was wrong with the ceiling. What looked like sharp conical stakes covered the ceiling like a badly eroded limestone cave.

And they had appeared from the side in sync with the crystal ball's

movements.

So what would happen when she swung that spear down?

“!!!???”

There was no time to spare. Quenser grabbed Kinuhata and Takitsubo in his hands and leaped back with all his might. He had no time to worry about the door, so his back broke right though the wall to take them into the hallway.

A tremor shook the entire school building, but it was not the gray pig that had caused it. An even greater impact had dropped from the electronic newspaper club’s ceiling.

And it did not end there.

Thorbjorg used both the soft and hard states. After falling to the floor, the pile of weapons melted and rushed toward Quenser’s group like a surging river.

Fighting that with punches or kicks would be the height of folly. That box of reinforced concrete was like a great maw lined with sharp fangs. Thorbjorg had chosen a hideout that gave her the perfect advantage.

(Dammit!!)

Unable to make use of his potential, Quenser almost immediately chose to jump backwards again, breaking out of a hallway window with his back. The gray torrent also erupted from the windows like spewing vomit, but they just barely managed to avoid having any of it contact them.

They had been on the third floor.

So Quenser spun around in midair and absorbed the impact with his legs as he landed. He could never have pulled that off in his normal body.

Thorbjorg did not come after them.

She elegantly approached the window and gave one glance at the scene outside before more than half the school building lost its shape like piece of candy in the hot air of a blow-dryer.

“Kinuhata, wasn’t there someone in there…?”

“The car is gone from the parking lot, so they must have fled. They might have heard us kicking down the door before this super clash began.”

The school building transformed into a giant coiled snake. Thorbjorg herself was not taken inside, so she stood triumphantly atop its head.

“My Offense Armor is from the ultra super winners of the beloved wind element, so someone from the eternal benchwarmers of the earth element has guts thinking she can outdo me…!!”

“Kinuhata, I’m not sure what you think you’re fighting over here.”

“You see, I am super respectful of Hollywood, but there’s one thing I can never accept. The way they show psychic powers by having people raise their hands and yell while a storm blows in and lightning strikes! Is it not shocking enough if it doesn’t fill the whole screen!? And now this plain old dirt-user is showing that same love of unnecessary flashiness. I’ll super teach you all about the *wabi* and the *sabi* of paranormal powers!!!!!!”

“And ultra super…?”

“What’s wrong with driving a point home!?”

After going to such lengths to hide her identity, the enemy was as far from discreet as possible once she got going. After this, there would be nowhere for her to hide in this city. …Was that just how afraid she was of being pursued from Ground’s Nir? A lot was still unknown about the conditions for constructing a Gate, but she may have been thinking of giving up on Academy City and fleeing to another world.

“Hey, queen atop her giant pile of shit, are you super listening to me!? Mwa ha ha. I know everyone would forget you even exist if you didn’t climb all the way up there, but I’m sick of all this. Take your filthy mountain and get back to your world!!”

(Why are you provoking her like that!? There’s no point in me staying silent if you do that!)

“…”

Thorbjorg smiled atop the giant snake’s head.

And still smiling, she swung the crystal ball spear and sent a great mass of cement down toward them.

Part 23

(Heivia/Ground's Nir)

They were up against the cutting-edge Second Generation Plasma Horn.

But Beatrice and Boo Boo's response was extremely simple.

"That thing is tiny compared to the Thousand Dragon I fought before."

Within the intense cannon fire, they first ran between the trees of the deep forest. Metal shells and electron beam weapons flew toward them like a horizontal storm, but they used more than one kind of movement.

For example, Boo Boo simply leaped to the side to dodge the shots.

For example, Beatrice used mirages and smokescreens to confuse the lock-on mechanism.

For example, Armelina summoned countless metal panels in front of her and diverted the shells' paths by letting them pierce those panels.

All the while, Filinion made sure to always hide behind someone to maintain a safe location.

(They really know how to do this! I'm the one that could learn something from them!!)

The three girls had had a very difficult time when they had clashed with the former soldiers of a Guild named Elkiad. And this time they were up against the extraordinary firepower of an Object. It might seem like they would be powerless against it, but that was not the case.

Elkiad had predicted the movements of their targets and used

multiple lines of fire to efficiently cover all routes, while the Object mechanically poured cannon fire down on them from a single direction. This was much easier to predict. It may have been like the difference between playing poker against a computer and actually setting chips down on a table in Macao or Las Vegas. The apparent rules where the same, but the atmosphere was entirely different. Someone who only aimlessly attacked from a position of absolute safety could never capture a beast that truly ran through the mountains.

But even then, they could not avoid the laser beams that locked on with EM waves and accurately shot down supersonic fighters or ballistic missiles at the speed of light.

That was where Magic came into play.

Specifically, White Witch Filinion's support potions. With a potion that added a numeric visualization of the encounter and damage probabilities in the corner of their vision, they just had to take evasive action when the percentage shot up.

…The Pilot Elite Princess could predict where the lasers would be fired from the slight movements of the cannons and targeting lenses, so this was a lot like instantly allowing anyone to do that.

If Heivia had known about it, he might have thought that alone was enough to start a war. Knowing Magic or not simply made that much of a difference.

(Oh, crap! They all ran off, so I was left behind! If I don't hide behind them and their crazy movements, I'll be dead before I can-…)

Time seemed to freeze as a shell larger than his head approached right in front of him.

"…Dbwah!?"

Time *seemed* to slow down a billion-fold, but reality was cruel. A tremendous impact exploded on his face and he flipped backwards like he was performing a bridge. An unpleasant sound came from inside his neck, the handsome face was squished, and something like angel wings spread out around him.

No, the wings had come from his head.

He was still alive.

While lying on his back, he groaned, rolled over, and slowly sat up once he realized he had not awoken from this nightmare.

The wings shielding him wriggled and then receded into his head again. It happened so quickly it felt silly to even think about how it worked with the conservation of mass.

“I’ve been wondering. Is it really the Cultivated Muscles doing that? I feel like that isn’t enough to explain it.”

He still could not produce the wings at will, so he was not confident he could survive several more shells like that. After deciding to catch up with Boo Boo’s group and use them as shields, the squashed handsome face took off running through the forest.

Part 24

(Quenser/Academy City)

In the schoolyard, the gray pig leaped to the side with all his might. He had the momentum of an artillery shell. A weird “Bgrrh!” came from Kinuhata’s mouth since he was holding her, but there was no time to worry about that.

The great cement serpent dropped down like a surging river and scattered gray weapons all around.

Pink track suit Takitsubo maintained her complete lack of expression. From the outside, it was impossible to tell whether she was taking this seriously or translating solar radio waves into human language.

Quenser used his toes to pull a metal spike out of the ground, kicked it up into the air, and then sent it rocketing out with a second kick. The average human would have been unable to move in time and it would have pierced right through their chest, but it did not work against the concrete witch named Thorbjorg. The great serpent rose up once more and carried her higher than the school’s roof in an instant.

(This isn't enough. I can't reach her if I stay on the ground waiting for a chance to strike back.)

He did not know where Thorbjorg's limits lay, but Academy City was an area of concentrated skyscrapers. There was a near endless supply of concrete for her to use as a weapon. And it would not necessarily work in Quenser's favor if people gathered to see what the commotion was about. The gray pig was another foreign factor that could threaten the city's peace.

A lengthy battle would not help him in any way. If Thorbjorg managed to escape and fled to another world, there would be no solving this.

He had to end it at this phase.

"…"

Quenser lowered the two girls to the ground.

Then he looked to his target and took action.

In the span of a breath, the ground exploded and his nearly-4m body flew into the sky. His target was the belly of the mountain formed by the coiled snake. The soft cement body would swallow up its prey like a bottomless bog and then crush them with the change of volume when it hardened, but he was not afraid.

Another explosion occurred when he landed.

The process repeated and the pig-faced giant never did sink into that bog. The creature the Cultivated Muscles were based on had hopped across the ocean surface like a skipping rock to fight a 1000m dragon over the ocean. With the resistance of cement, he could easily run across its surface.

"Tch…!!!???"

The bluish-gray witch roared at the peak.

The surface of the serpent rippled and countless spikes welled up. They rushed toward Quenser to pierce his feet, pin him in place, and drag him down into bog.

But.

Not even that could do it.

He met the tip of the rising spikes with his toenails to negate the impact with perfect equilibrium and managed to stand atop them without being pierced. By repeating the process, he raced along the raging serpentine path at unbelievable speed.

It was not long now until he reached the concrete witch named Thorbjorg.

Quenser could already see fear in her widened eyes.

Part 25

(Heivia/Ground's Nir)

The best option for the Plasma Horn may have been to throw out their pride and fall back while continuing to fire on those puny humans. After all, an Object could freely move about the battlefield at more than 500kph. Looking at ground vehicles, it was unknown if even a linear motor train could overtake one moving at top speed on a straightaway. Its enemies could not stay focused enough to continue dodging and defending forever. If it kept its distance while continually firing, its enemies would eventually self-destruct due to human error.

But Boo Boo was a different matter.

For one thing, he was not human.

His giant body raced between the trees of the forest like an artillery shell and approached the fleeing Plasma Horn. It was not that the Object was losing speed due to all the trees it was knocking down. The pig-faced giant was just that extraordinary.

And Beatrice was a step behind him. Intense flame wings erupted from her back and she flew just off the ground instead of running. And unlike Boo Boo who was a physical shell racing in a straight line, she had many forms of fire Magic. She did not need to actually reach her enemy to attack. Sometimes it was multiple lines of heat that tore through the scenery and sometimes it was balls of light that scattered sticky flames when they hit. The attacks covered the Second Generation in orange.

Of course, not even a nuke could destroy an Object, so this was not enough to seriously damage it.

But what was the entire concept behind the Plasma Horn's design? It intentionally reduced the stability of its plasma to scatter heat and shockwaves over a wide area, that melted the enemy Object's surface and slowed its movements, and then it finished off that enemy with a focused main cannon blast.

Couldn't someone else do the same thing?

In other words, Beatrice's attacks held it in place and Boo Boo supplied the true attack while it was knocked back.

"…"

The giant gray body arrived at the bottom of the H-shaped static electricity propulsion device. While that close, it was actually harder for the Object to target him. Instead, the Plasma Horn moved closer to Boo Boo to either tear him apart with the powerful static electricity that kept that colossal mass afloat or to simply hit him with that same mass.

The pig-faced giant did not fight it.

As the Second Generation slid sideways toward him, he took his club, which could be mistaken for a log or a steel beam, and stabbed its tip into the dirt ground.

A moment later, a massive amount of dirt erupted up in a hemispherical dome.

It was like a meteor strike.

And whether they used static electricity or an aircushion, Objects generally kept themselves afloat by constructing a layer of air or a field of power between the ground or sea and itself.

So if something it interpreted as the ground was placed in between, it would try to move along that instead.

Yes.

For example, a dome-shaped explosion.

Part of the problem was how the Object had turned so sharply to crush Boo Boo.

It floated up.

Unable to hit Boo Boo, it passed by far above his head as if crossing an invisible arched bridge.

And that temporary footing would not last forever.

Once it lost its support, the Plasma Horn wobbled in the air. Unable to regain its balance, the side crashed into the ground instead of the H-shaped static electricity propulsion device. It then bounced and picked up speed. There was no stopping it now. Like a giant bowling ball, the cutting-edge Second Generation rolled from the forest and toward the coast of the island.

“Well, that was awful. They just won with brute force before even trying to investigate the Object’s weaknesses. I can see why the Plasma Horn wanted this so bad.”

Heivia lamented to himself once everything had finally settled down.

Part 26

(Quenser/Academy City)

It was settled in an instant.

By the time the gray pig had arrived so close, her fate was more or less sealed.

“Ah, ahhhh!!”

On the serpent’s head, the concrete witch named Thorbjorg frantically tried to swing around her spear with the crystal ball on the end, but Quenser would not even allow her that. He wrapped the troublesome crystal ball in his giant palm and held it in place.

He only needed his other hand to end this.

He passed his full strength from his legs to his hips and then to his shoulder and unleashed a fearsome punch toward the bluish-gray witch’s face.

The blow sounded just like a roar.

The deep sound reverberated in his gut even more than the Hand Axe plastic explosive he always used.

Part 27

(Heivia/Ground's Nir)

The series of events was over.

Raw scorch marks remained in the forest and a 50m mass of special steel was lying in the middle of the island. If it stayed there, it might just become a new dungeon to explore. Generally, anything other than humans could not be taken back to earth, but this was an extreme exception. They could disassemble it here and take the technological information back with them. It would mean the end of the world if things like that were rumbling around Tokyo. Beatrice sensed a new incident coming, so she focused herself again.

"Oh, right…"

But that aside, it was time to end the current incident. The Holy Swordswoman with red and silver hair slowly narrowed her eyes and spoke.

"If it's over, then could you return to your world? I want to go fishing with Boo Boo and have fun with him on the waterside if possible."

"Is that all you ever think about!? In a way, I'm relieved, but how can you say that in front of Heivia the Ultra Handsome Noble!? Focus on the good-looking guy right in front of you!"

"G-good looking? Your face looks more like a bank robber wearing a stocking over their head. I think you put too much of a burden on that thing."

This was a fantasy world where a gray pig was the star, so a brown-haired boy straight out of a host club may have been a poor match. Heivia decided the next world he visited needed to be a thrilling one where he sat on a flirting sofa with a girl and played a game

where he had to eat the long chocolate snack she held in her mouth without breaking it and the penalty for failure was death.

“Looking at it that way, maybe I wasn’t meant to be born in world of guns and steel. Maybe I should set out for a reincarnated hero love comedy world where I win over a billion heroines but can’t remember who’s who and have to go around remaking a list of them all!”

“Quit your complaining and go home. Don’t make this worse than it already is.”

“Armelina, why are all three of you – red, white, and green – acting so indifferent!? You’re the heroines, aren’t you!? So show me some tears when we say goodbye!!”

As the distorted handsome face complained even louder, he did sense some tears.

The one trembling and holding a hand to their mouth was the gray pig, Boo Boo.

“Squeal…”

“Boo Boo!! So you’ll cry for me? I knew I could trust you!!”

They exchanged a hug, so Beatrice kicked him away.

Part 28

(Quenser/Academy City)

“It’s over.”

“Yes.” Kinuhata put her hands on her hips as she read the text the gray pig wrote on the ground. “Focus is going to be on that enemy who can control concrete, so I recommend using this change to head back home.”

“I have to take her with me if I’m going to return everything to normal. I’ll be dropping her off in another world on the way, though.”

“Then you really should hurry. Academy City is all about gathering technology, so they’ll be drooling over an unknown information source like this. Once they get their hands on you, you’ll never see the light of day again.”

“I see. Yeah, I guess you can’t have them mass-producing pigs like this. And can I even get this off? I don’t even feel like I’m wearing anything anymore.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Kinuhata waved her small hand dismissively. “I still don’t really get what’s happening, but something from an unknown place could be covered in unknown bacteria and enzymes. What’s normal to you might be a treasure trove of biological resources for us. Which means…they’ll cut you open, pull out all your organs, and place them in a centrifuge.”

“～ ～ ～——[indecipherable] Please no! What kind of horrific and inhumane dystopia is this!? You people live in a terrible place when it’s making me miss the 37th! Are you even aware how messed up that is!?”

Part 29

(???/???)

And thus the “original cause” was captured, the culprit was defeated, and the problem was resolved without further issue.

Quenser and Heivia somewhat reluctantly passed through the Gate to cross worlds. They carried the sources of the paradox back the way they had come to repair history and to free themselves from the light curse of the Cultivated Muscles.

They traveled between worlds.

They did not say goodbye. They did not look back.

If they did ever meet again, that would be in the future, not the past.

Part 30

(???/???)

And.

“Hey, Quenser. If it worked, why are we still wearing this squashed handsome face and that gray pig? And why don’t I recognize this place?”

“But we did everything in reverse order…huh? We did that for the ‘original cause’ and the Plasma Horn, but did we include the 16th’s original trial and error tests in our calculations? If not…”

“Anyway, what’s with this amusement park city?”

“It feels even more intense than those other worlds, doesn’t it?”

And somewhere in that world, a boy in a red hoodie confronted a girl with white twintails.

“Queen, what have you brought here this time?”

“Let’s just call it a surprise. Our stalemate is just so booooring, isn’t it?☆”

An All-In “World” Tour of Academy City, the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion, and Ground’s Nir!!

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Back ↑